DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 225 UD 028 659

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TITLE	Chinese Immigrant Students in the California Classroom. New Faces of Liberty Series.
INSTITUTION	California Univ., Berkeley. Graduate School of Education.; Zellerbach Family Fund, San Francisco, Calif.
PUB DATE	89
NOTE	11p.; For related documents, see UD 028 657-662.
AVAILABLE FROM	New Faces of Liberty/SFSC, P.O. Box 5646, San Francisco, CA 94101 ($2.50 per essay plus $1 tax, postage, and handling; or $15 for the series of eight essays plus $2 tax, postage, and handling).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Acculturation; Asian History; Cantonese; *Chinese Americans; Chinese Culture; *Cultural Background; Elementary Secondary Education; *Immigrants; *Limited English Speaking; Mandarin Chinese; Minority Group Children; Refugees; Relocation; *Student Attitudes; United States History
IDENTIFIERS	*California; Language Minorities

ABSTRACT

The largest Asian American ethnic group in the United States, as well as the group with the longest immigration history, is the Chinese. The presence of Chinese immigrants is felt strongly in California, the state where nearly 40 percent of the nation's Chinese have chosen to live. The history of Chinese immigration is traced to help understand Chinese students in California classrooms. The school-age population in California reflects the history of China as well, since immigrants from Taiwan and mainland China arrive with very different views of Chinese history and culture. Immigrants from Hong Kong may feel themselves, or may be seen to be, only marginally Chinese. In California, the immigrant student population is still predominantly Cantonese speaking, but Chinese speakers cannot be lumped together because of the diversity of languages and dialects. These is great diversity among immigrants in the degree of exposure to English and the rate at which English is acquired in the classroom. Against great odds, the majority of Chinese immigrant students have managed to extract a meaningful education and contribute to their adopted homeland. (SLD)

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CHINESE IMMIGRANT STUDENTS IN THE CALIFORNIA CLASSROOM

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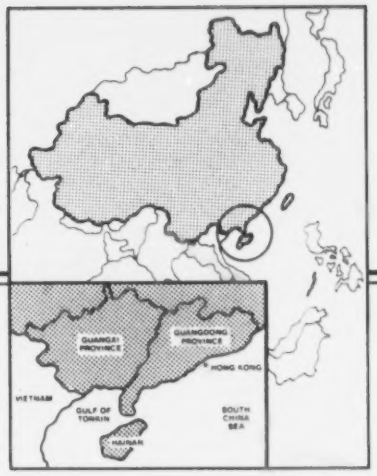
Chinese Immigrant Students in the California Classroom



By Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, Ph.D.

The largest Asian ethnic group in the United States as well as the group with the longest immigration history is the Chinese. Sixty-three percent of the 806,000 Chinese in America are foreign-born, so the presence of Chinese immigrants is felt strongly in the schools of California, the state where nearly 40% of the nation's Chinese have chosen to live.

To understand Chinese immigrant students in the California classroom, it is helpful to know the 130-year history of Chinese Americans. Chinese first came in large numbers to the United States during the 1850s to work in the California gold fields and help build the transcontinental railroad. The early immigrants met with overt discrimination and frequently were subjected to violence. Despite their valuable contributions to California's development, especially in agriculture and fishing, the Chinese became scapegoats for the state's economic problems during the late 1800s.

In 1882, at the height of the anti-Chinese movement, the first Chinese Exclusion Act was passed to prohibit the entry of Chinese laborers. Chinatowns gradually developed into "bachelor societies" devoid of family life. The Exclusion Act was not repealed until 1943, when popular sentiments toward Chinese Americans became more sympathetic as a result of China's alliance with the United States in the Second World War. Even after the repeal, only 105 Chinese per year were allowed to immigrate, although the non-quota admission of war brides did balance the gender ratio somewhat.

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the subsequent outbreak of the Korean War led to renewed hostility toward Chinese Americans, who were cut off from their land of origin due to the United States' policy of not recognizing the PRC. Except for about 14,000 Chinese refugees from Hong Kong admitted under special legislation in the early 1960s, Chinese immigration remained severely limited until 1965, when the racially based immigration laws, which had favored immigration from Northwest Europe, were finally reformed to allow a uniform annual quota of 20,000 immi-

grants from a given country based on occupational and family preference categories. This marked the beginning of a large influx of Chinese immigrants into the United States, especially from Taiwan and Hong Kong. (Other Asian American groups experienced a similar expansion, with the exception of Japanese Americans.) When diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC were normalized in 1979, many Chinese Americans resumed contact with their families on the Chinese mainland. Immigration from the mainland has since become more common.

For Chinese Americans, 1965 is a watershed date. Chinese immigrants before 1965 were mostly from Guangdong (Kwangtung) Province in southern China; in fact, the majority of the "oldtimers" were from rural areas in and around the Pearl River Delta. They spoke Cantonese dialects, and typically had little formal schooling before immigration.

Early Chinatowns were tightly knit communities, a result both of the hostility of the dominant society as well as the forces of traditional family and regional loyalties. While the homogeneity of the Chinese American community was tempered somewhat by the "stranded" foreign students from China who stayed in the United States to avoid political upheavals back home, it wasn't until 1965 that the community underwent a major recomposition. The professional preference categories for immigration brought in a large number of highly educated Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Many of them immigrated in family units, and the earlier, predominantly Cantonese "bachelor society" gradually gave way to a diverse, multi-dialectal, multi-generational Chinese American community of a heavily urban cast. The traditional family and district organizations lost some of their influence to the new generation of community organizations.

After the normalization of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the United States, trans-Pacific family ties — considered too dangerous to acknowledge in both McCarthy-era America and Cultural Revolution-era China — were resumed. Thus, some recent immigrants from the PRC resemble the rural Cantonese "oldtimers" in background, while others are from the families of former foreign students, usually embodying a tradition (albeit interrupted by the Cultural Revolution) of learning and/or privilege. Consequently, in socioeconomic terms the Chinese American community is "bi-modal," with affluent, middle-class professionals clustered at one end and menial laborers of limited upward mobility at the other. The popular image of Chinese Americans as a homogeneous "model minority" that has "made it" is an oversimplification.

The Chinese community has been augmented by ethnic Chinese immigrating from places outside of China. Many ethnic Chinese came from Vietnam after the 1979 Vietnam-China border conflicts; mostly Cantonese-speaking, they quickly gravitated toward existing Chinese American settlements. These ethnic Chinese are not included in

official counts of Chinese Americans, but they contribute to the considerable heterogeneity of the community.

How may this brief historical sketch of the Chinese American community help one understand Chinese immigrant students in California classrooms today? Since the school-age population reflects immigration history and diversity of the community, it makes clear the danger of expecting uniformity in outlook and behavior just because the students share a common Chinese ancestry. Historical awareness helps one keep in mind not only the complexity of contemporary Chinese America but also the frequently overlooked fact that Chinese Americans have been and still are an ethnolinguistic minority — even in a state like California, whose own growth has been inextricably bound up with the group's evolution.

There are enormous and pervasive pressures on immigrants of color to justify their existence to hostile nativists. Especially for young immigrants in that powerful socializing agency called school, the combined experience of permanent dislocation and rapid "Americanization" necessarily shapes them as powerfully as — if not more so than — their linguistic or cultural antecedents. Culturally sensitive teachers must go beyond broad knowledge of a student's "ancestral culture" (which may, indeed, have little direct effect on his or her current way of life) and attend to subtleties in the dynamics of interaction *between* groups from different backgrounds. Chinese immigrant students must be understood as a group with mixed characteristics and complex interactions.

Let us begin by looking at how various Chinese immigrant subgroups might feel about "being Chinese." *In general,* one can say that the Chinese tend to have a strong sense of cultural identity. Pride in their rich, 5,000-year-old cultural heritage, memory of China's recent humiliation and domination by Western powers, and awareness of her increasing influence in the international scene are factors that can create a common bond among Chinese from different backgrounds.

However, this broad statement must be qualified when applied to the outlook of school-age immigrant students in the United States. Those with some formal schooling in a predominantly Chinese community before immigration to the United States will have a greater sense of cultural identity than those who came to the United States as very young children. However, even among those who feel strongly about being identified as Chinese, some may interpret the term quite differently.

For obvious political reasons, the educational systems of both China and Taiwan present highly selective versions of Chinese history to their students and champion very different concepts of "being Chinese." To strengthen their claims as legitimate representatives of the Chinese, the Nationalists in Taiwan promote traditional Confucianism;

the Communists on the mainland emphasize nationalistic sentiments. As for Hong Kong, a colony until its scheduled return to China in 1997, its British rulers have encouraged political apathy and historical amnesia among their young Chinese subjects through a narrowly utilitarian curriculum. This, plus a cosmopolitan urbanism that has diluted many traditional cultural practices, has caused many Hong Kong Chinese youngsters to feel "marginal" in the mainstream of Chinese life.

Immigration to the United States, one of the Western powers that threatened China in her painful transition into the 20th century, is likely to bring to the foreground many of these conflicting feelings about being Chinese. Immigrant students from Taiwan or the PRC may regard a fellow Chinese student from Hong Kong as insufficiently Chinese, while the latter may find the former chauvinistic or provincial. It is immaterial who is right in this case, for it is a matter of perceptions rather than facts. The point is the teacher in an American classroom cannot assume that two Chinese immigrant students will automatically take to each other on the basis of a "common linguistic heritage," which is itself a rather elastic concept contingent on emotional or political needs in specific contexts. A similar point may be made about the linguistic diversity within the Chinese immigrant community: A "common linguistic heritage" may or may not bring Chinese immigrant students together, depending on specific conditions of interaction.

The Chinese immigrant student population in California is still predominantly Cantonese-speaking. State Department of Education figures in 1985 (DATA/BICAL Report #85-2) show over 19,000 Cantonese-speaking students identified as LEP (limited English proficient). In contrast, there are only 7,000 Mandarin-speaking LEP students (together with a small number of speakers of other Chinese dialects). While not all immigrants are LEP, the LEP figure provides a convenient estimate of the immigrant population, since students are not tabulated by place of origin. Yet the distribution pattern shows that Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking immigrants are often in the same schools; for example, San Francisco Unified School District, which has the highest concentration of Cantonese-speaking LEPs, also ranks second in the number of Mandarin-speaking LEPs, while the Alhambra City Elementary School District ranks first and fifth, respectively, in the concentration of Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking LEPs.

Since different Chinese dialects connote different things to different people, teachers who lump "Chinese-speakers" together, either in attitude or in classroom practice, may be in for some surprise. It is well known that Mandarin is China's national language as well as the basis of the written language — both the PRC and Taiwan use Mandarin as the official medium of communication and instruction. However, dialect loyalties remain strong. Except for the northern Chinese, whose dialects are close to the Beijing (Peking) version on which the national language is based, most Chinese speak a noticeably

different dialect at home though they study Mandarin in school. Thus a student from, say, Shanghai may be most comfortable speaking Shanghainese and feel closer to other Shanghainese speakers than to native Mandarin speakers, although his or her Mandarin may be equally fluent.

In Taiwan, the linguistic situation is further complicated by the fact that after the Nationalist government took over from the Japanese colonizers in 1945, political repression of the local Taiwanese population created hostility between the Mandarin-speaking "mainlanders" and the Taiwanese-speaking locals. (Taiwanese is a member of the *Min* dialect family, different from both the Mandarin and Cantonese, or *Yue*, dialect families.) The term "Taiwanese," which in English is an innocuously ambiguous adjective (either *of* or *from* Taiwan), may be the cause of misunderstanding or resentment when loosely used about immigrants from Taiwan.

In Hong Kong, the main dialect is standard Cantonese, as spoken in Guangzhou (Canton), the provincial capital. As a city dialect, standard Cantonese is more prestigious than the rural dialects spoken by the Chinese American "oldtimers" and their descendants, such as Toi San (which is still influential in many Chinese American communities, including San Francisco's Chinatown). The Hong Kong version of Cantonese has the image of being slang and "hip." Very recently, since China and Britain negotiated the conditions for the future return of Hong Kong, there has been more interest in teaching Mandarin in the schools, which hitherto have been bilingual in Cantonese and English, but a typical Hong Kong immigrant student is unlikely to be proficient in Mandarin.

Since mutual comprehension between Chinese dialects is limited and different dialects are colored by different environments, the effect of intragroup language barriers cannot be underestimated. Again, sensitivity to diversity is the key here. Of course, in contrast to speech, there is only one written Chinese language, which does foster cultural unity — but even here differences in script exist. The PRC promotes simplified Chinese characters in an extensive effort to spread literacy, while most Chinese elsewhere continue to use traditional characters.

Besides diversity in mother tongue, one must also look at the use of English by various subgroups of Chinese immigrant students. The English proficiency of newcomers is of great concern to most classroom teachers, even those in subjects other than language arts, since it so strongly determines a student's access to a meaningful education in the United States. Perhaps the only safe generalizations are that (1) great unevenness exists among Chinese immigrant students in prior exposure to English; and (2) the students' experience as newcomers in the American classroom has a profound effect on the subsequent development of their English proficiency.

Hong Kong, which has been a British colony since 1842, has a bilingual system of education. Until at least symbolically equal status was granted to Chinese in 1974, English was the sole official language, mastery of which was required for well-paying jobs. However, the widespread teaching of English in Hong Kong schools does not guarantee uniformly high English proficiency. The emphasis on English has been more a principle of colonial policy than a social reality; Chinese is still used in most non-official interactions, and contact with native English speakers is largely a function of social class. Thus, the initial English proficiency of immigrant students from Hong Kong can vary widely, depending on background.

A similar observation may be made about immigrant students from Taiwan. In general, English is less frequently used in Taiwan than in Hong Kong, but because of U.S. support of the Nationalist government, American culture exerts a great influence on the island and English achievement is a status symbol. The social elite often send their children to English-medium "American schools" to be educated alongside non-Chinese children, while for the majority English is taught as a subject in public schools, most likely by non-native English-speaking teachers. Thus, like immigrant students from Hong Kong, those from Taiwan may enter the United States with meager "book knowledge" of English, nativelike proficiency, or anything in between.

As for China, since the nation went through a long period of isolation and educational chaos during its Cultural Revolution, the teaching of English has suffered from a plethora of ills, including ideological restrictions, poor staffing and lack of appropriate teaching materials. Currently, the study of English has become something of a national fad, but the old pedagogical problems have not been resolved. In all three areas — Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC — teaching methodology tends to lack the focus on "communicative competence" which Western experts consider essential for effective second-language learning.

Regardless of initial English proficiency, all Chinese immigrant students entering U.S. classrooms are subjected to the same powerful pressure to assimilate. In particular, students who studied English only as a school subject are in for a shock upon transplantation to an all-English environment, where inability to perform in the language is penalized not only by a bad grade but by a host of "real-life" consequences, especially in the area of social life. Whether or not they feel any continuity with their forebearers — most likely their knowledge of Chinese American history is vague, for Chinese Americans are often perceived in their homeland as "overseas Chinese" who have been cut adrift and are thus peripheral — today's Chinese immigrant students are still experiencing the same alienation that the early Chinese immigrants felt: a sense that their differences from the dominant group are not respected but are regarded as abnormalities or deficiencies. Of these differences, the linguistic may stand out as a source of

painful rejection. A Chinese accent is among the foreign accents commonly ridiculed by speakers of American English as ugly or comical, in contrast to "classy" accents such as the French. Thus, Chinese immigrant students may feel tremendous pressure to "lose their accent," with some accomplishing the transition within months. However, the rapid assumption of superficial marks of assimilation does not always signal full social integration or even complete competence in English.

Researchers in second-language acquisition point out that while immigrant children usually learn adequate social functioning in English within two years, it typically takes six to seven years for them to catch up to grade norm in academic performance in English. Therefore, teachers must use caution in deducing how well an immigrant student has adjusted. Differential development in language skills is common among Chinese immigrant students. For instance, some may speak articulately but make many basic errors in writing, while others may write English beautifully without exhibiting a corresponding oral fluency. Overlooking variations in English development patterns may result in misplacement of students or misinterpretation of their behavior.

It also should be noted that how fully one learns a language is not always amenable to conscious control; after all, language *is* one of the most powerful identity markers, so the acquisition of a second language is necessarily a complex and emotional process. For immigrant students, the problems encountered in learning English are often compounded by the stresses of relocation. Under these circumstances, forcing them to drop their mother tongue, punishing them or shaming them when they show reluctance to perform in English, or providing technical assistance in English without emotional support are likely to harm them in the long run, even if short-term results appear impressive.

Several additional factors are frequently cited to account for the difficulties Chinese immigrant students might experience with English: the fact that Chinese is a non-alphabetic, tonal language with radically different grammatical structures and intonation patterns from English; the emphasis in traditional Chinese culture on restraint, reticence and respect for authority which may inhibit verbal performance; the value placed by immigrant families on technical professions as the key to upward mobility, at the expense of the student's well-rounded development; stereotyping by teachers and counselors who readily attribute innate mathematical aptitude to Chinese immigrant students when they may just be going through a phase of finding security in familiar academic subjects. As even this cursory list shows, what commonly goes by the handy label of "the language barrier" is inseparable from the rest of the student's life. How an individual Chinese immigrant student responds to the competing linguistic, cultural and academic claims of his or her environment can only be understood by careful and sympathetic observation.

The powerful influence of American culture in the Chinese immigrant student's life can be seen in yet another facet: the relationship between the foreign-born and the native-born Chinese. Recent Chinese immigrant students are often rejected not only by Anglos but also by native-born Chinese Americans, who feel they have more in common with the dominant group than with the newcomers. For all practical purposes, to the second- or third-generation Chinese, Chinese culture may be an alien culture rather than their "native heritage." Hostility between the FOBs (Fresh Off the Boat, a derogatory term for recent immigrants who are visibly unacculturated) and the ABCs (American Born Chinese) may be pronounced. The newcomers may find the native-born Chinese too Americanized and may look down on their lack of knowledge of things Chinese; on the other hand, the native-born Chinese may join the dominant group in ridiculing the newcomers for fear of being associated with those who look, act and talk "funny." The rift is exacerbated by the fact that the newcomers and the native-born are often carriers of the regional, occupational, social class and other differences of their parents — differences noted previously in the summary on immigration history. Given the high stakes involved — social acceptance from the in-group one considers more important at the moment — both the foreign-born and the native-born Chinese students may adopt various coping strategies to define their place in the school environment. The struggle is especially intense for students who immigrated around the age of puberty, a difficult and insecure time even when one doesn't have to cross cultures.

This brief account cannot begin to do justice to the complexity of the Chinese immigrant student population in California. As we have seen, on the whole the lot of these students has by no means been easy. Yet, against great odds, the majority of them have managed to adjust to their new environment, extract a meaningful education from an unfamiliar system, vindicate their parents' difficult choice to alter their lives in mid-course, and contribute their share of hard work and talent to their adopted homeland — a continued tribute to the resilience of spirit and practical resourcefulness which have characterized immigrants in this nation for the entire span of her history.